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*Remarks of Mary Loftus Levine
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Before the Education Committee
Raised Bill No. 944, LCO No. 2883

**An Act Concerning a Plan for Academic and Personal Success for
Every Middle and High School Student
Monday, March 9, 2009**

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey and Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Mary Loftus Levine. I am the Director of Policy and Professional Practice for the Connecticut Education Association. I am here today to share our views on Raised Bill No. 944, which sets the stage for the "Connecticut Plan" for reforming secondary schools.

First, the Connecticut Education Association applauds the fact that the plan sets our collective sights high. Today, we ask for you to carefully evaluate whether our reach exceeds our grasp in terms of state and local resources and long-term commitment. As we continue to feel (and some would say suffer) under the impact and pressure of NCLB, which has never been properly administered or funded, we do not need to repeat these same mistakes.

The 41,000 teachers of the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) urge a realistic assessment of that commitment in order to ensure that educators will be well equipped – with regard to resources, class size, and professional development – as they embark on implementation of high school improvement in partnership with other stakeholders in educational excellence. It is critical that every classroom, in every building, in every school district should be included in this frank assessment, so that when we move ahead it will be on a level playing field of equal opportunity for all students.

As the high school plan moves into the legislative arena, we urge careful analysis and thoughtful examination. At this point in the high school reform effort, we urge the following improvements:

1. Provide and facilitate strong professional development components for educators based on research and best practices, including for new mentoring/advisory and Capstone programs.
2. Refine alternatives or individualized standards for students assessed as not being able to meet these new requirements with a focus on individualized support for underachieving students.
3. Set reasonable goals for high school graduation rates over time.
4. Create greater opportunities for smaller learning communities.
5. Develop strategies for early identification of potential dropouts.
6. Provide higher education tuition incentives, particularly for urban students.
7. Expand learning opportunities and connections with colleges and universities.
8. Provide greater access to technology.
9. Ensure that 21st century skills drive the development of curriculum and assessment.
10. Base assessments on benchmarks and growth models, providing additional time and necessary support systems; create local alternative assessments with diagnostic focus that are timely and useful to teachers and students.
11. Develop a model with a greater emphasis on parental and community support, responsibility, and education.
12. Share specifics of the plan cost analysis with broad audiences and solicit input to ensure adequacy.

One of the most serious challenges facing this plan is the current and future condition of our economy. We cannot afford to continue trying to "go to the moon in a 747." We feel the cost projections provided are grossly underestimated. Here are four straightforward examples:

1. Student Success Plans -- Cannot be implemented by simply hiring one additional teacher. Time, staffing, program development, training, scheduling, and structural/space issues need to be considered to provide quality programs. Adding this assignment to the workload of guidance personnel is a recipe for inadequacy.
2. Capstone Project -- Although 40% of districts reportedly may already offer a similar project now, releasing and reassigning current staff will likely need to occur. Specifically, one teacher per school is insufficient. SSP teachers/mentors would also need to be involved and follow a student for 4 years.

3. Professional Development – This critical piece calls for training of one teacher per high school off site, and one participant for new technology training. Not only is this insufficient, professional development needs to be done on site and in small groups to achieve transfer of learning in an effective way.

4. End-of-Course Exams – There are added burdens at the local level in the areas of training for scoring, time reallocations and data collection services. Creating a reliable and valid system within and among districts poses a genuine challenge.

Other questions and details need to be seriously considered, discussed, and addressed, such as:

1. Construction costs to build and/or redesign school buildings into new 21st century facilities (e.g. virtual labs, science labs, areas to create and deliver projects, work in collaborative teams, etc.).

2. Redesign schedules, job descriptions, reconfigure transportation, provide technology, books, materials, and resources.

The inclusion of the middle school years in the plan is a very positive step in the right direction. We commend this move and hope that the state will continue to drill down even further, using the latest brain research available, to expand resources for early childhood initiatives. The research clearly demonstrates that dollars spent in the early years of a child's education produce results.

The Connecticut Plan for High School Reform, although based on many sound concepts, appears to be driven by an overemphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) courses. While we all recognize the need to enhance these critical areas, not all students are, in fact, going to focus their careers in these areas. In essence, the plan's emphasis seems to be based on what was once considered a "college prep" program. The plan would be insufficient if it favored one career path over another. Policymakers need to be cognizant of the importance of vocational and technical pursuits, as well as the humanities and a broad range of career paths.

End-of-course exams are recommended to count for 20% of a student's final grade. Involved in the plan are a model state-developed curriculum, coupled with these mandated tests. This raises concerns about a "one size fits all" approach. Teachers fear that curriculum narrowing, at the expense of the arts and other pursuits will continue as we move to more state mandates.

We currently witness on a daily basis the results of high-stakes testing in our schools. As has been said frequently in recent years, simply taking a student's academic temperature will not cure what ails him or her. We have societal and economic gaps in educational opportunity, access and resources. These demand the attention of policymakers because our achievement gaps do not exist in isolation from other societal and economic problems. Along these lines, we feel this plan does not go far enough in addressing societal forces such as housing, institutional segregation practices, parental involvement and support, jobs, economic opportunity for families, and health concerns – all of which have a clear impact on student success.

This plan contemplates "embedding" 21st century skills into each curriculum, as well as forming the basis for the required Capstone Project. We believe that 21st century skills should not simply be add-ons or used as evidence for one project. Using these skills as the philosophical basis for the plan would have been a more appropriate application. Any curriculum which is developed should reflect these skills at its core. This plan will rise or fall in the area of curriculum development. Disadvantaged districts will benefit greatly from any resources provided to develop strong curriculum, along with accompanying high-quality staff development and training from the State Department of Education.

While the above comments are not in any way exhaustive, we urge you, our legislators, to be cognizant of all aspects of the plan before us, as well as any probable unintended consequences of what appears to be a shift to a model of stronger statewide control of Connecticut's secondary schools.

We have all seen the impact of NCLB, a federal system driven by high-stakes testing, a one-size-fits-all approach, and serious underfunding. We have seen other states move away from end-of-course exams when dropout rates began to soar. Any reform of the magnitude of the Connecticut Plan needs to be based on sound research of what works, not experiments in other states or comparisons with countries with homogeneous populations. Perhaps strong consideration should be given to statewide funding of public education to accompany the proposed state mandates.

Our students need and deserve strong, safe, effective 21st century schools that provide the best education possible. Our fear is that we will once again end up with more standards, more mandates, and more experiments – without the funding, support, and resources necessary to do what really works.

In summary, this plan and its consequences are too serious, expensive, and far reaching to begin implementation in such a quick and almost "back door" way. We suggest more in depth discussion, thoughtfulness and time for public reaction, especially since the landscape is far different than it was in October of 2008, when the plan was adopted by the State Board of Education. The public is not showing much economic support for our current educational programs and systems. Perhaps postponing any implementation now until we know what the future holds is the smart and cautious way to go. We should at the very least give a plan like this the respect it deserves by allowing it to enter through the "front door".

Thank you.